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Advanced Studies in the Graphic Novel

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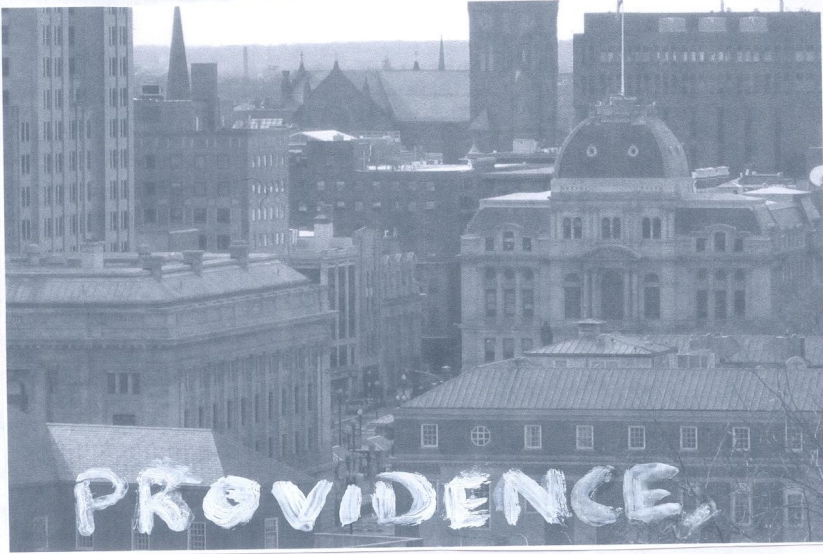
Advanced Studies in the Graphic Novel

Stephanie Dunson

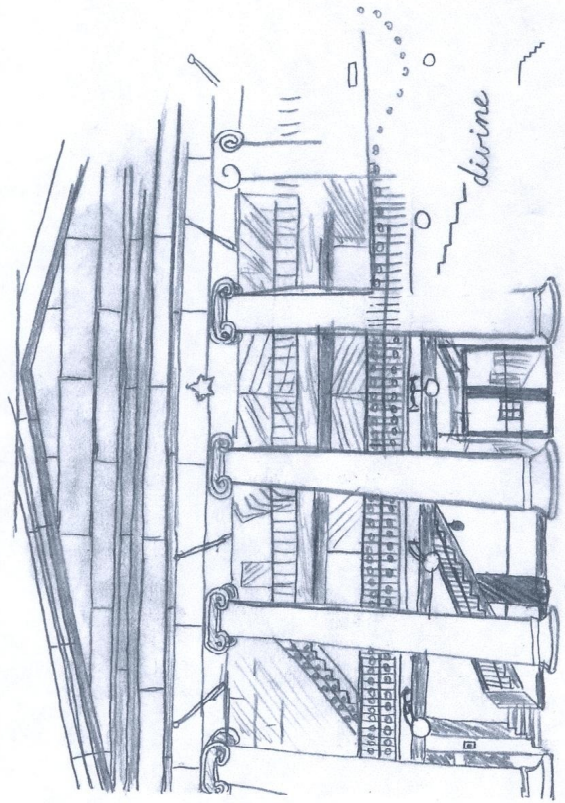
Advanced Studies in the Graphic Novel entails a practical intimacy with the form. My work serves to elucidate only some of the many differences between the graphic novel and traditional literature, to complicate the use of written language in the form as it relates to images, to address confrontations with publishing, and to share intimately the process and mechanisms by which my effort functions.

The paper will reveal the guts of the effort (itself a graphic novel) and in doing so will highlight issues as they uniquely relate to the form, and hopefully encourage others to attempt such work. The topical subject of my effort, inspired by the literature of H. P. Lovecraft, is a concern about anonymity.

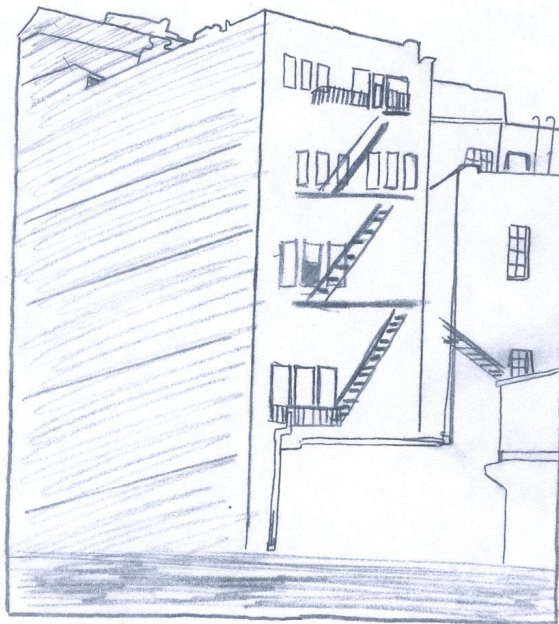
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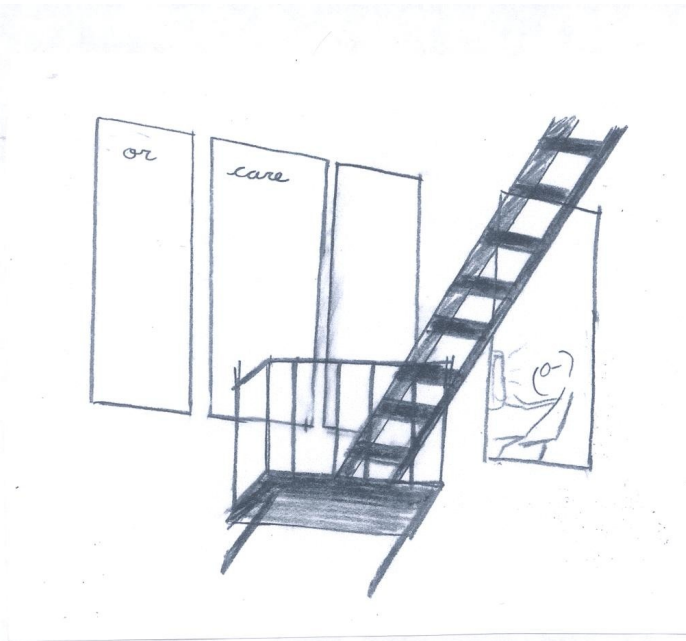






guidance



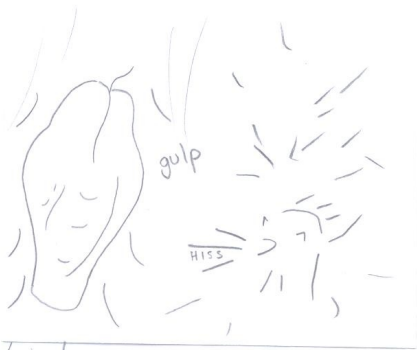


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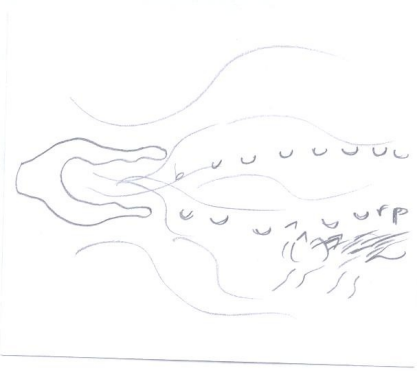




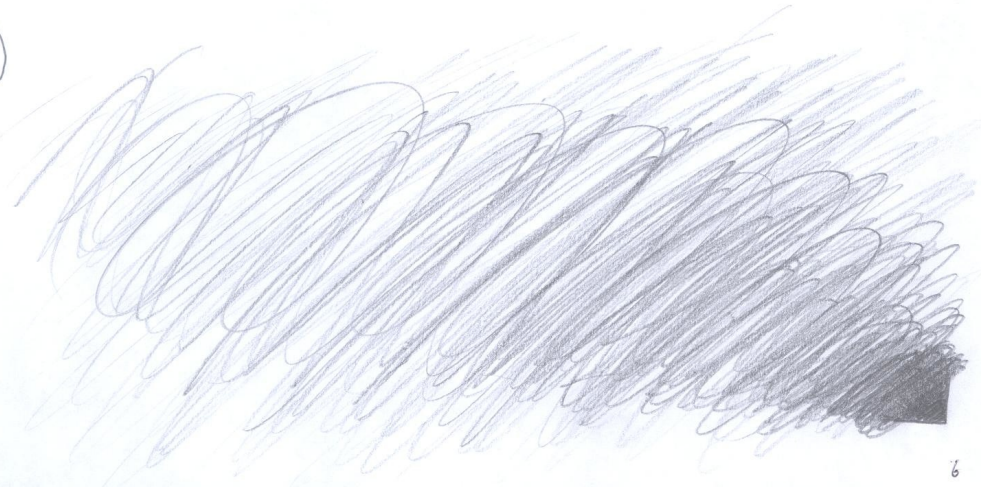
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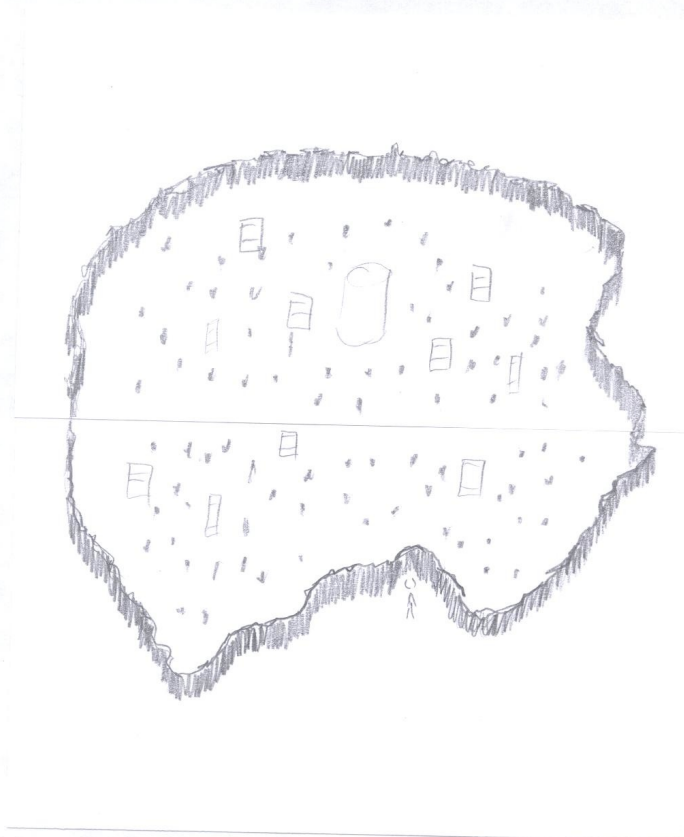


gulp
lower



car gets lost?





overhead view
walled
place

organic fence separate



squeeze by



tweet dodge



flying to horizon over fence rolling



pumped



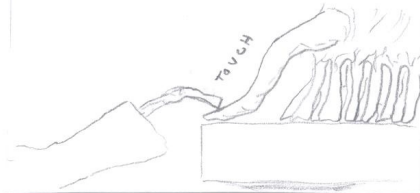
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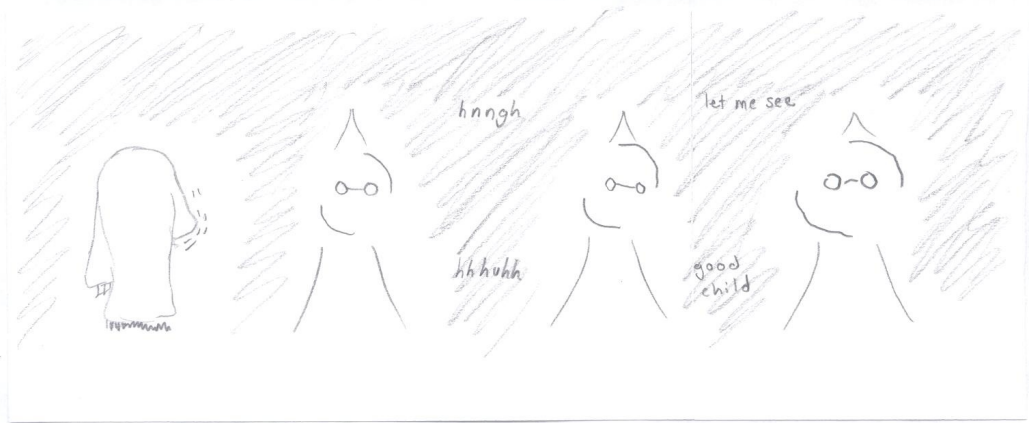
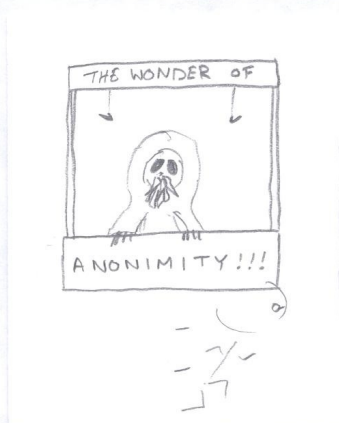


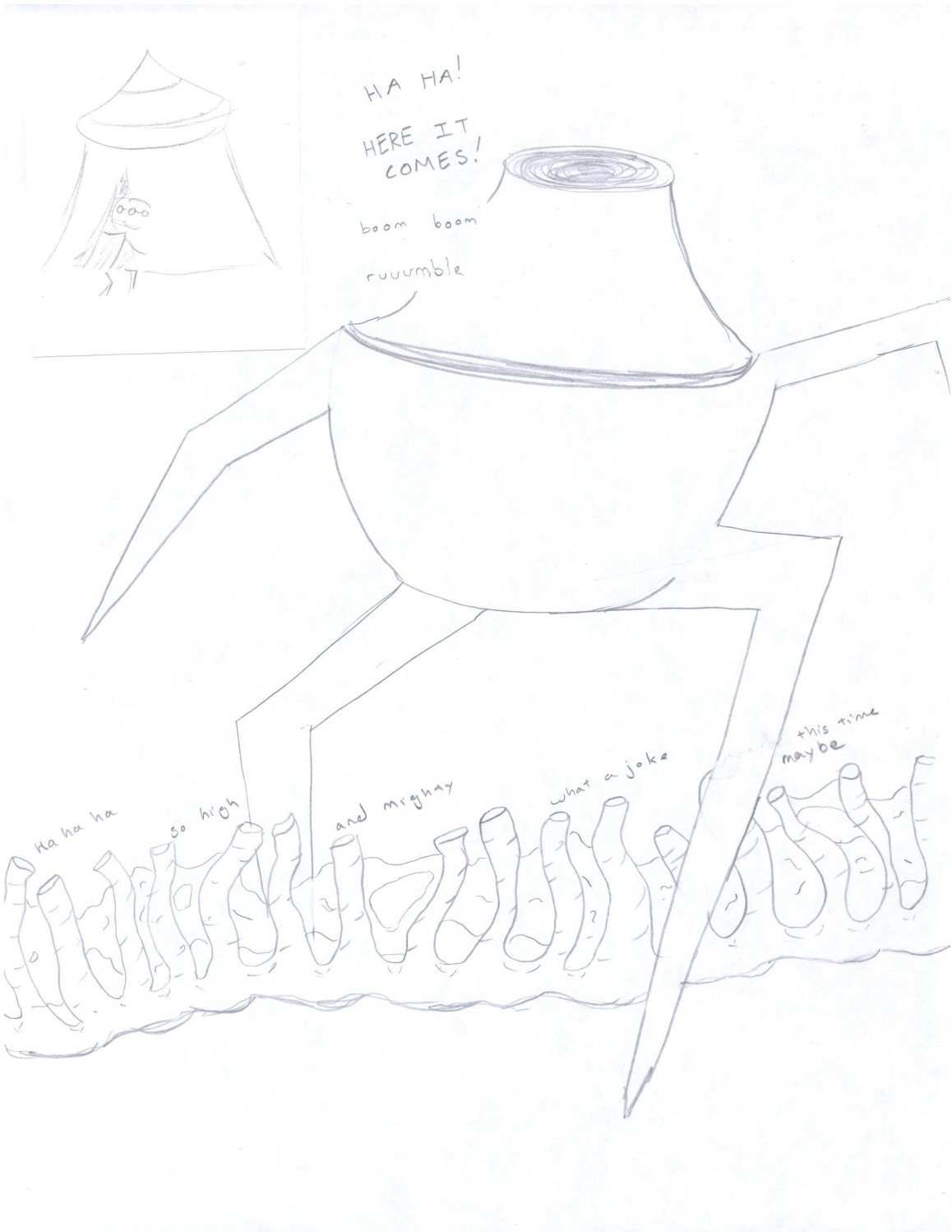
no touching

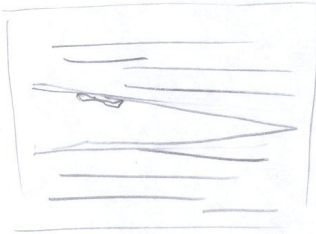
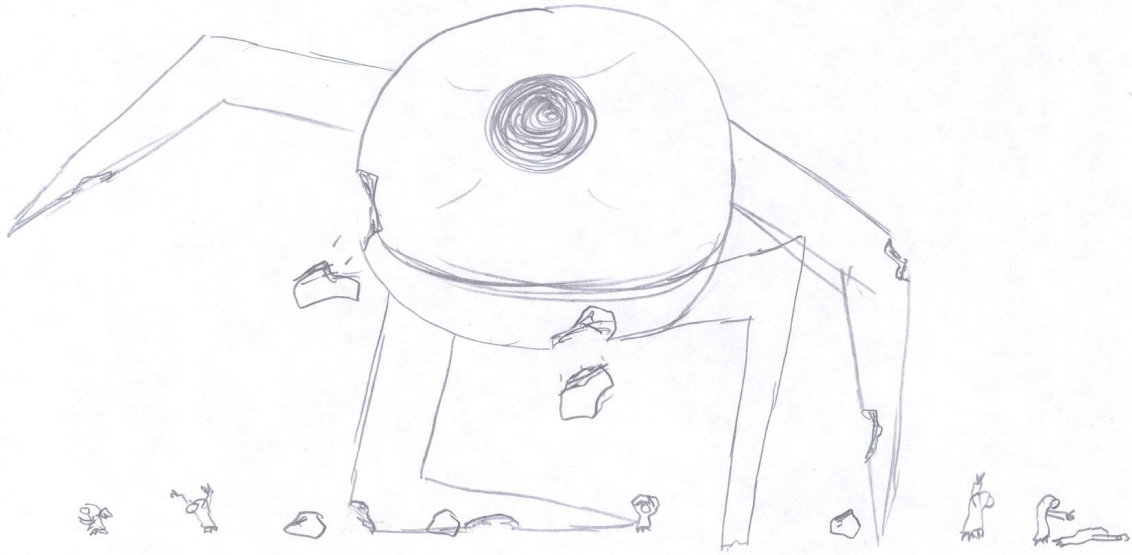


followed by a good view into the market?

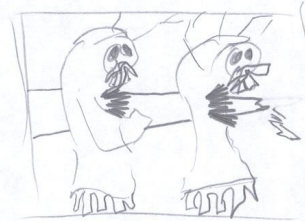








crumble

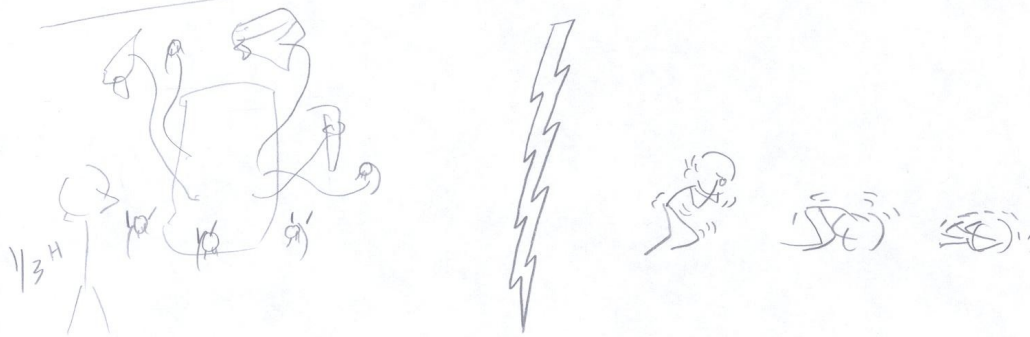


battle

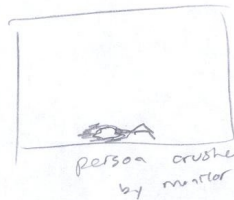
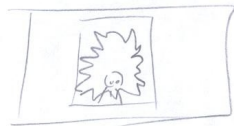
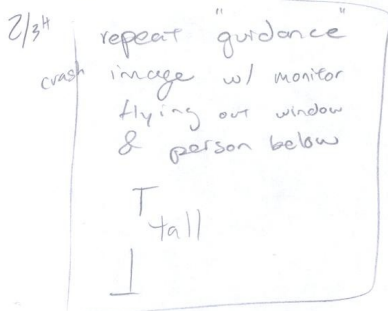
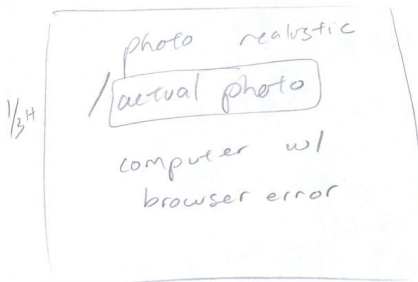
golem destroyed

2/3 H

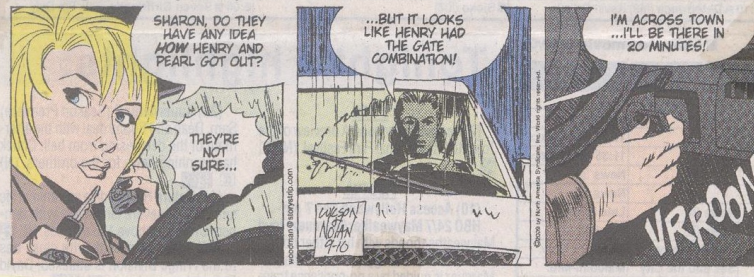
big party divided



- new page -



Rex Morgan, M.D. by Woody Wilson & Graham Nolan



A bit of synaesthesia by the form of the word bubble. We know, from habit, that it's over the telephone, but it's sharp form implies, conjoined with the knowledge of it being on the phone, a crackly, distant voice.

Here, the wiper has cut through the water on the windshield, yet the following frame shows the car starting. Logically, the images should be switched the text can remain the same: Imagine the second frame, moved to the third position, saying, "I'm across town... I'll be there in 20 minutes" — would add a palpable sense of determination. This would be accentuated by the reformed 2nd frame which would juxtapose direct, exposition with the synaesthetic roar of an engine.

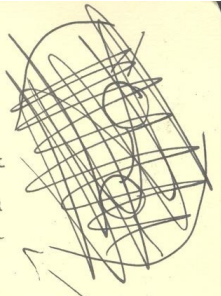
I was reading the comics today, 09/10/09 and noticed some things. Copyrighted material included for academic purposes only.

The Amazing Spider-Man by Stan Lee



I decided to include this for its temporal-spatial design. Frames 1 and 3 have the character on the left at moment X and the character on the right is reacting in a temporal space of moment $x+1$, relatively. They occupy the same frame and absolutely physical place, unbroken by closure; yet time progresses within.

As I wrote about above, how a reformed frame 2 would increase the tension, or punch, this spider-man frame 2 achieves the same effect by having only one self-contained moment. Frame 1 and 3 are fluid, frame 2 seems to pause on spidey (this is co-operative with Wolverine being absent from the frame, and the dashes at the end of his speech).

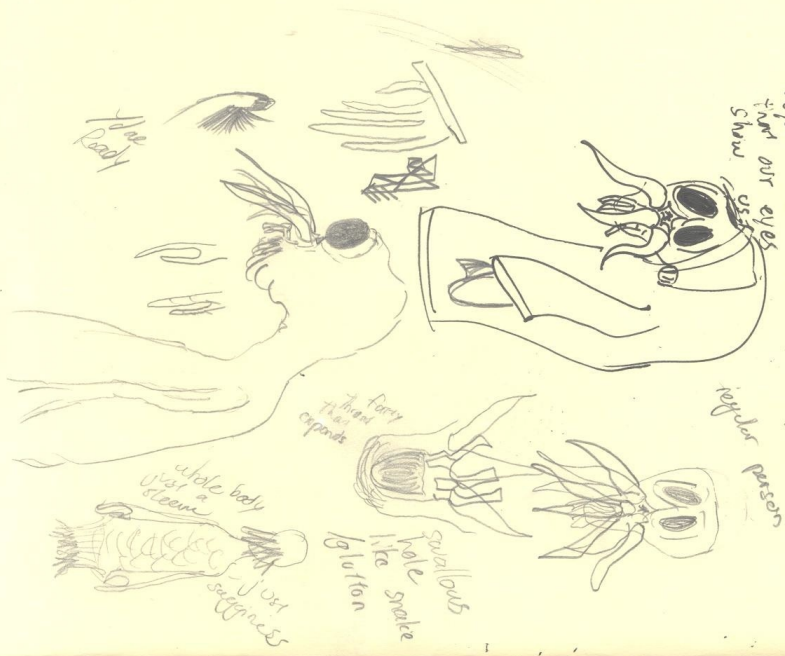


black and grey



time

all I know
and all I know
is that I
was taken
beyond the world
just our eyes
show us



regular pores

four
than
capable

swallow
like snake
location

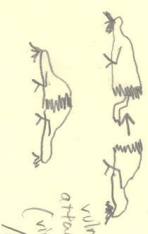
whole body
just a stream
just a stream



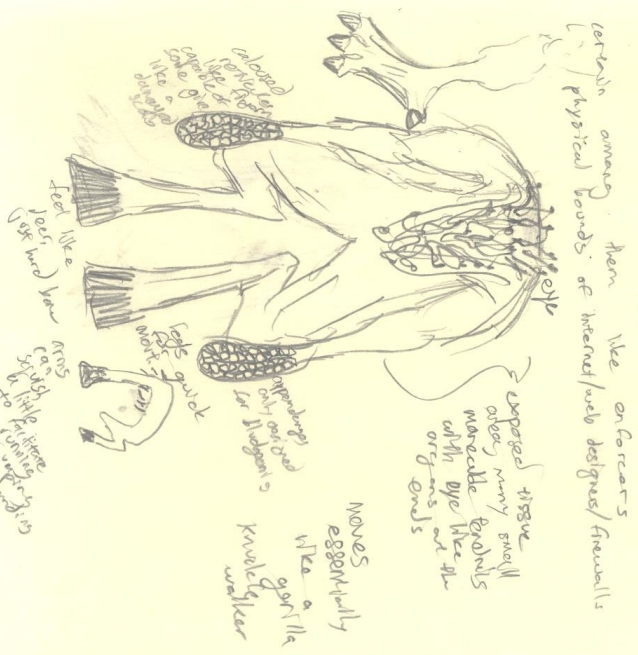
pronating
muscles



possibly positive
reproductive
the blood
capable of
relative to
position to
relative to
movement
to transmit
achieved through
transmission
achieved through
transmission



vulnerable
attacks occur
(vessels from
parapharyngeal
muscles)



certain areas
physical bands
of internal
muscles/fascia

exposed tissue
altered, many small
movable protrusions
with dye like the
organs at the
ends

NOSES
essentially
like a
golf ball
knob-like
walker

feet like
feet, hand
feet, hand
feet, hand
feet, hand

Basic terms defined

Graphic Novel refers to a form of art that juxtaposes images and text as units of communication and places them in relationships with other similar units. Sequential art, comics, and pictorial literature are all equivalent terms. Likely “Graphic Novel” will remain a valued term used to market such art. “Comics,” while also referring to the same formal qualities, retains the connotation of superhero.

Panel refers to (typically) the box inside of which some portion of story telling occurs. Panels contain some image and some text. Text can be narrative, and usually within a smaller box within the panel. Text as dialogue is usually within speech bubbles. Synaesthetic text, which wishes to convey sound (often onomatopoeically) or emotion, is rendered in a different way than narrative text and dialogue.

Closure refers to the empty space between panels, which is not always white. As time passes and communication occurs within panels, communication also occurs between panels, that is one panel’s relation to the one before and the one after. The lack of explicit communication of the relationship between the two panels, closure, requires the reader to imagine the relationship between the two.

Concept

The origin of my effort (my graphic novel/comic/pictorial literature/sequential art) comes from a variety of places. The literature of Howard Phillips Lovecraft has interested me since I moved to New England. The odd, nagging fear proposed by his literature finds its uncomfortable seat in the psyche by way of the incomprehensible. Whether or not his style (using words antiquated even at his time, and occasionally

deferring to the ineffability of the horror of the creatures he wrote about) expresses the incomprehensible, his literature does concern itself with the incomprehensible. The revulsion often felt by his characters in the face of abomination, I have felt on the internet. I consider it best not to point to the sites that have caused me such unrest, but it is worth mentioning, for the sake of the effort, that effronteries to the conception of civilized human behavior occur online.

Feeling a bit like a character in a story by Lovecraft, I decided to write a short story using some of his critical ideas to create an allegory of my disgusting experiences. The story then became the topical subject matter for my effort. The main concern of the effort, in spite of its permutations, the issue at the heart of my unrest was the effects of anonymity. In short, when offered total anonymity, people explore avenues of their minds that would not otherwise be traversed. A difficulty that I faced, which will be addressed later, was a changing of my attitude towards anonymity. A graphic novel seemed as suitable, if not more suitable than, a short story to my topic. The form of graphic fiction allows a variety of depiction; I wanted to distance the reader so that moments of revulsion would be the moments of close psychic engagement.

Transparency of communication

Transparency of communication does not refer to clarity of communication. A photorealistic image of a cat communicates more transparently the notion of a unique cat than an abstract image of a cat, which communicates the notion of all cats, or an ideal cat. Both polarities communicate something clearly; transparency refers to force with which an image (in this case) causes the engaged to conceptualize an actual cat. An abstraction

of a cat retains the transparency to be *of a cat*, yet it can be any cat ever, anywhere, or no physical cat at all, communicating willfully the notion of a cat. Text too operates under these terms. A word's relative simplicity, its transparency, is in whether it has been selected for denotation or connotation. Additionally, the word in the sentence, as it has been placed is of concern. And still, the sentence in relation to those around it, how it has been structured itself, and its use of punctuation, all affect its transparency.

This ease of conceptualization, or envisioning, the transparency of communication, becomes uniquely active in a graphic novel, as ideas are communicated by two dissimilar means: image and text. Within a single panel, let alone an entire graphic novel, the degree of abstraction in an image or text will affect the reader's needs of the other. Considering a balance of communication, where that which is being communicated is neither totally transparent nor totally opaque, if an image is abstract, the text ought to be concrete; where the text is abstract, the image ought to be concrete. The more difficult it is for the reader to understand what is occurring before them, or rather to draw conclusions as to why something has occurred before them, the less engaged he or she will be. Here is a responsibility to a reader, which will be addressed later. However, some art is very challenging to the reader, and a graphic novel may make unique use of its formal qualities to challenge the reader: there does not have to be an ideal level of communication that creates a positive/negative relationship between the images and the text. Both image and text can be very abstract. Perhaps the engaged will undulate, submerged in the effort, with the ebb and flow of comprehensibility, until sinking to some soft, relatively sturdy, sand wherefrom he or she can visualize shapes in shadow through the murky depth.

My effort actively varies its degrees of abstraction (its transparency of communication) in both image and text. It begins concretely: a photograph of Providence, R.I., with the word “providence”. The next panel is a tracing of a photograph of Weybosset, with a growing degree of abstraction, accompanying it is the word “noun”; the visual abstraction occurs (for one reason because the engaged sinks into the abstraction of the protagonist) to express the textual abstraction between the two panels. The first panel communicates a similitude between image and text: the city of Providence. The second panel visually communicates a portion of the city of Providence and textually communicates the beginning of the definition of providence, or what providence/Providence is. The abstraction continues until the reader is with the protagonist in his domicile.

As a counterpoint to the abstraction of the protagonist is the greater detail of the monsters in the computer. As greater detail conveys with greater ease the notion of an actual thing, it seemed suitable to add detail to the images of monsters that don’t actually exist, having no experiential point of reference except in their individual parts (I think here of a chimera, which aggregately has no actual counterpart, whose individual parts each have experiential points of reference.) With any luck, the reader has been distanced by the progressive abstraction at the start of the effort, and then finds the monsters to be the easiest conceptual loci. With any luck, the nearness to the monsters will create a more visceral reaction to the habitudes of the monsters.

Finding my effort difficult to comprehend, I considered adding a gloss. With images abstract, the opportunity for transparent text arose. I then realized something.

What would be a gloss to a graphic novel is in fact already often employed: it is the narrative text that commonly comes in yellow boxes at the top left-hand corner of panels. Although a gloss, as such, is not integrated into the narrative. Narrative “glossing” is within a panel, recognized as the narrative voice.

Most of the text in my effort is onomatopoetic, which helps to create a repulsive mood. (It is imminently important to iterate that the profanity on page eight is a quotation from Twitter.) Using text to depict a sound, or any feeling, is best referred to as synaesthesia or the synaesthetic use of text. Lines themselves can depict emotion (which I tried to achieve on page ten), and so text can also depict non-visual sensory impressions, in a way beyond onomatopoeia, as text is made of lines. Buzz, already an onomatopoeia, likely calls to mind the sound a bee or a saw makes. Buzzzzzz creates a more audible impression. BUZZZZZZ still greater. **BUZZZZZZ** communicates the same noise but with much greater immediacy, or synaesthetic tactility, as if one is going to get stung soon. Synaesthetic textual depiction is so variable that an increase in font size, and the most basic of word-processing alterations, affects profoundly; consider graphic novels as a form without forced typeface.

Within the synaesthetic use of lines I would delineate between three specific modes found within my effort: line alone, line as text (which has been explored at length above), and all text. To finish line as text, pages 5, 6, 10, and 11 are fine onomatopoetic examples. Considering line alone, often times in manga (Japanese comics) lines are used in the background to communicate the physicality of a strong emotion felt by the character at the center of the panel. I attempted similar communications on pages 5, 6, 7, and 10. More interesting still is the notion that all words carry with them an emotional

impression. Although graphic novels have a generally similar typeface, there is no mandatory font. The text has been traditionally rendered by hand, with only new comics, like web comics, using word processing software to render text. The artist is allowed the freedom to render dialogue as he or she will, and allowed the freedom to convey a greater sense of emotion in the depiction of the letters of the word as such. Velimir Khlebnikov, in 1913, writes in “The Letter as Such,” that handwriting conveys a mood independently of the words, and that a writer should entrust the physical writing of his book to an artist. Truly, although better examples can be found in graphic novels besides my effort, graphic novels capitalize on the ability to convey emotion in the way that the text is written by an artist. The most applicable example within my effort is the first page, the way the word “providence” is written. Although, comparing the texts of page eight and nine serve to express Khlebnikov’s proposition.

Problems in development

A problem that arose was publishing. The anxiety from it made it very difficult to work. Responsibility to a reader is simultaneously productive and destructive. On one hand, I felt as though there would be no reader who would enjoy, or be able to rise to the occasion of my effort. On the other hand it was very helpful to consider visual rhetoric. True, a work can be as abstract as it would like, but are the abstractions themselves still intelligible? Is the inconceivability of the image intentional? Or will a reader simply throw the work down? Here is a difference between clarity of communication and ease/transparency of communication: as mentioned earlier, a work can communicate with as much or as little ease as it desires, but clarity of communication should be perpetual.

Clarity of communication can be established by a similarity of images—a general similitude between the representations of characters, for example. If one character’s visual depiction varies from panel to panel, then there must be other forms of communication at work to indicate that the character is variable. Concerning myself with these things, I created a fog around my effort, rather than focusing on the work and then considering publishing.

Visual rhetoric—how well I draw—was another problem. Khlebnikov suggests a writer should allow an artist to physically write for him; I certainly should have allowed an artist to draw for me. I’m not the worst visual artist, but that doesn’t really say much. I am especially fond of the last two panels of page nine and the first two panels of page ten. In addition to their visual clarity, there is an expanded sense of closure, a mini holding of the breath, when one turns from page nine to page ten. Once the page is turned, are two panels that have a small sense of closure: the arm is up, then the arm is down (not much is left to the imagination). And the lines of movement, sense of motion, and synaesthetic rendering of the onomatopoeia “splurt” clearly express that the creature who touched is now a puddle of goo. My effort is a quick challenge, and could certainly be refined, yet, as it is, it retains the energy of my motivation. Were I to work with an artist, we would create a visual atmosphere, and more details in the allegorical world.

Another difficulty that arose was that my attitude toward anonymity changed within the near two years since I first wrote the short story upon which this graphic novel (graphic short story?) is based. I had seen the social side of the internet as an aberrant quagmire, with anonymity expressing its productive ideal mind. However anonymity has its place, and its own spirit to it, and the mind is very complicated. People express and

explore and fabricate selves, which would not otherwise be accessed, online, and this warrants more attention than a strict disavowal. I will readdress with more specificity, and a closer relation to Lovecraft's mythos, the things that generated the emotive capacity for the short story from which came this effort later in time.

As a quick note to indicate the growth that has occurred since the time I began the project and the finishing of the project, I did not know at the time I took the photographs for my project that Weybosset is part of downtown Providence.

Intentional walkthrough

Page 1: A photograph of Providence, with the word "PROVIDENCE." the text's visual expression intends to suggest dissimilarity between the image and itself, the assuredness between what each thing is.

2: To continue such a disparity, the image is a deteriorating realistic depiction of part of Weybosset with a sturdy depiction of the word "noun." Here "providence" is beginning to be defined, hopefully the inclusion of the definition of providence as not a city continues an odd psychological space, where the reader cannot expect to be provided easy understanding.

3: In the same spirit as the previous two pages, an image of the Arcade Plaza with the word "divine".

4: And again, a derelict building with more of the definition of "providence".

5: Panel A Continuation of the abstraction. Includes main character sitting at his or her computer. **B** Character working at his computer, cat meows. Ambient marks to synaesthetically portray his unawareness of his surroundings. **C** Looking at the cat, his

awareness is to the cat, and so the dots are around the two of them. **D** His computer has grown a mouth and moves towards him, unaware. Perhaps the cat is attempting to warn him, very casually. **E** A very typical synaesthetic onomatopoeia for something snapping down. Closure would imply that he has been bit. (Special note: there are my own notes written on the effort as it has been presented. As it remains, presented to the reader, these function as a gloss, as they have not been integrated into the narrative with formal similarity.)

6: A Character struggles against the computer monster. The cat is freaked out. Ambient dots are now dashes to portray a charged atmosphere. **B** “sshlurp” intended to portray the character being sucked into the mouth of the computer monster, without an image. **C** Dashes become lines suggesting downward movement with the computer monster and the word “gulp,” to portray that it is swallowing. The cat hisses and retains the charged atmosphere of dashes. **D** To the right of the swallowing panel is the computer monster belching at the cat. **E** Underneath these two panels is the character falling out of the panel, out of the computer monster, into progressive darkness, falling into something else.

7: A B C A zooming in on the character, intended to draw the reader in psychically, the third panel with synaesthetic lines to portray his weakness. **D** After the drawing in of the top three panels, I wanted an overwhelming image of the character before a living tubular fence, with creatures bustling around, and a giant panoptical tower. A brief sketch of a finer image is to the right of this panel.

8: A The living tubular fence. Between each “post” is a gooey secretion, which is stretching out of the panel on the right side. (The image is rather gross, but does not

achieve the same impact that “goosey secretion” likely does. A playful and affective way to achieve the “goosey secretion” effect would be in the spirit of Chris Ware’s diagrammatic work. To isolate a portion of the living fence and then portray pictorial the process by which, at a cellular level, the fence secretes its elastic mucus.) **B** The character passes inwards, the elastic mucus has snapped. **C** Immediately he must dodge a kind of bird. It’s a dangerous place he’s entering. **D** As it flies away, it says something that bothers the character, his emotional reaction portrayed in the lines around him. (As mentioned earlier, the text is quoted from twitter.) **E F G** The character bumps into a monster, and is demeaned for not knowing that no one is allowed to *touch*.

9: A B C The character passes by three individualized stalls selling body parts, at which the monsters display very human behavior, one trying to attract attention, or threatening, two shooting the breeze casually, the last bored. **D** The character spots a crowd that may be in an auction. **E** He stands on a box to see above the crowd, this panel could be better depicted by him pushing through the crowd. **F** Here is a monster disrobing on a pedestal supported by two other monsters, next to it is a new creature, and another monster reaching towards the one on the pedestal, saying “please, please, your effluence,” which is a typo of effluence. However “your effluence” sounds like a title. If the disrobing monster is the only time the larger monster is also present, it could be a sort of bodyguard. Had I the artistic talents to depict exactly what I would have liked to, there would be several of these larger monsters, which are allegoric of the line between the virtual and the actual. **G** One monster touches the monster on the pedestal.

10: A B The monster who touched is crushed. **C D** The character vomits and runs, hopefully it is not surprising that he is already so terrified that he would flee at this

moment. With so little detail in the character, it should be likely that the reader responds to the character as he or she feels. If the reader has been brought into the story and feels a degree of discomfort, then fleeing seems like a rational response. However, if a sense of disgust has not been achieved in the reader, the fleeing seems either unexpected, or the reader observes the flight rather disinterestedly. **E F** He runs by a stall and into a tent. **G** This panel begins with the image of a monster from behind, and then a focus on the face of the character, the character's face becomes more synaesthetically expressive as time passes and he hears noises from the monster.

11: A The character leaves the tent in a hurry. **B** A large, bizarre, vase-like creature enters the area. It is given the majority of the page to express its size and presence.

There's no way for a reader to know this, so it's unimportant, but this creature is from a dream of mine, it is a cyclopean defender of art and beauty.

12: The creature begins to kill the other monsters, and as it does, it crumbles.

13: This page is very sketchy. It was not finalized out of indecision as to whether or not to remove the panoptical tower that is occasionally seen in the back of panels. The first panel would be split into four, showing the vase creature attacking the tower. The vase creature is then destroyed. A lightning bolt sort of synaesthesia and then the character is brought to the fetal position. He awakes to a photo-realistic image of his own hands. Then the character throws his computer monitor out the window, which may or may not land on someone, killing them.

14: The fourteenth page is a brief critique of two comics cut from Sunday funnies. For "Rex Morgan M.D." for the first panel: "A bit of synaesthesia by the form of the word bubble. We know, from habit, that it's over the cell phone but its sharp form implies,

conjoined with the knowledge of it being on the phone, a crackly distant voice.” And for the other two: “Here, the wiper has cut through the water on the windshield, yet the following frame shows the car starting. Logically, the images should be switched, the text can remain the same: Imagine the second frame, moved to the third position, saying, “I’m across town... I’ll be there in 20 minutes!” –would add a palpable sense of determination. This would be accented by the reformed 2nd frame which would juxtapose direct exposition with the synaesthetic roar of an engine.”

For “The Amazing Spider Man”: “I decided to include this for its temporal-spatial design. Frames 1 and 3 have the character on the right reacting in a temporal space of $x+1$ respectively. They occupy the same frame and absolutely physical place, unbroken by closure; yet time progress within. Frame 2 achieves tension by having only one self-contained moment. Frame 1 and 3 are fluid, frame 2 pauses on Spidey, which is cooperative with Wolverine being absent from the frame and the dashes at the end of his speech.”

15: Included here are sketches of the most common monster within the work as well as the enforcer type monster.

Suggested reading

“The Letter as Such” by Velimir Khlebnikov

Debaser by Raf

Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud

City of Glass by Paul Auster, adapted by David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik

Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo by Yoshio Sawai

V for Vendetta by Alan Moore